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Home Alone: South Africa's Regional Predicament

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South Africa finds itself in a severe internal crisis that has serious implications for its neighbours. As the regional hegemon is turning inwards, it has largely been unable to engage in regional crises in a constructive and meaningful way. As a result, we see a worrying downward trend in Southern Africa, traditionally a haven of stability in Africa.

- The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified South Africa's social and economic woes. Unemployment has reached an all-time high; more than half of the youth cannot find a job and live in poverty. This has bred public discontent and protest.
- The governing African National Congress (ANC) is ravaged by internal power struggles between "traditionalists" and the "reformers" around current president Cyril Ramaphosa. While official investigations have exposed deeply ingrained corruption in state-owned companies, the ANC suffered a serious blow in the November 2021 local elections.
- Being preoccupied with its domestic challenges, the government has largely remained inactive in responding to gross human rights violations in neighbouring Zimbabwe and eSwatini. Additionally, authoritarian Rwanda, not South Africa, has led the regional response to jihadist violence, deploying elite troops to quell the Islamist insurgency in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region.

Policy Implications

The European Union and Germany both have a strong interest in further supporting South Africa and thereby also the broader Southern Africa region: South Africa is one of the world's few democratic regional powers: it can be a core partner in fighting the global climate crisis, and its progressive constitution closely aligns with the new German government's focus on promoting human rights and women's empowerment. Finally, with more than 600 German companies present in South Africa, German business interests would profit from fostering stability in the country and the Southern African region.

Mounting Crisis in South Africa

Three recent events shocked South Africans and have come to symbolise the deep crisis in which South Africa, one of the continent’s heavyweights, finds itself. In July 2021 the country saw violent protests and lootings – South Africa’s worst post-Apartheid violence – in the Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces following former president Jacob Zuma’s jailing. He had refused to obey a court order to testify before the official Zondo Commission that investigated allegations of “state capture,” mismanagement, and fraud in South Africa’s public sector. The violence left more than 300 people dead, the destruction caused damage worth millions of euros and devastated the livelihoods of thousands of people.

On 26 December 2021 Desmond Tutu, the former archbishop of Cape Town and a moral authority in the country, passed away. The Nobel Peace Prize laureate was an acclaimed anti-Apartheid and human rights icon who tried to forge a united “rainbow nation.” His reputation rivalled that of former president Nelson Mandela, and his death was mourned across the world. Finally, on New Year’s Eve South Africans watched with disbelief as a fire, apparently set by an arsonist, ravaged the National Assembly buildings in Cape Town. For the first time, the president could not deliver his traditional State of the Nation Address in the chamber of the National Assembly on 10 February 2022 but had to speak at the City Hall of Cape Town.

In that address, President Ramaphosa promised his nation he would “finalise a comprehensive social compact to grow our economy, create jobs and combat hunger” within 100 days ([Ramaphosa 2022](#)). But the country’s social and economic problems are formidable. The COVID-19 pandemic and the government’s exceptionally strict lockdown measures have exacerbated severe poverty and inequality in the country. The official unemployment rate has risen from 28.7 per cent in 2020 to a record 34.9 per cent at present (46.6 per cent, if an expanded definition is used); more than 60 per cent of South Africans under the age of 25 who could work are currently jobless. Several waves of infections caused nearly 100,000 recorded COVID-19-related deaths.

Yet, despite the decisive action taken against the pandemic, Ramaphosa and his African National Congress (ANC) government have not been able to lead the country out of its severe socio-economic malaise. According to the World Bank, South Africa is the most unequal society in the world, characterised by the staggering wealth of a few on one side, and widespread poverty, particularly in the former “homelands” and townships of the Apartheid era, on the other. On a positive note, South Africa seems to have overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and has lifted almost all related restrictions. The economy, particularly the tourism sector, seems to be rebounding quickly after it shrank by 6.4 percent in 2020 ([IMF 2022](#)). However, recent experience puts a damper on optimistic scenarios: For years South Africa’s economic growth has been sluggish, performing well under the level necessary to lift broad sectors of the population out of poverty (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Economic Growth in South Africa, Compared to Average in Sub-Saharan Africa

Source: [World Bank \(2022\)](#).

State Capture

South Africa’s crisis is also a crisis of the ruling ANC, which is deeply split between supporters of Ramaphosa and the “traditionalists” that benefitted from his predecessor Jacob Zuma’s misrule. Due to widespread misappropriation of public funds, dubbed “state capture,” large parts of the local administration and state-owned companies, most notably the public utilities, are dysfunctional. The Zondo Commission, which investigated corruption and misuse of funds for four years, presented the last of three extensive reports in March 2022. They paint a picture of a rotten public sector and exposed the misuse of state resources and corruption at state-owned companies such as electricity provider Eskom, South African Airways, and Transnet. These companies all became cookie jars for the politically well-connected elite. Leading ANC members from the party’s most powerful “top six” and National Executive Committee are directly named in the reports – for instance, former president Zuma, along with current mineral resources and energy minister and ANC chairman Gwede Mantashe. This will further increase the pressure on President Ramaphosa to act decisively against the misbehaviour of leading ANC members. The key question will be whether the president will indeed follow the commission’s recommendations, as he promised.

Losing Hegemony: Coalitions against the ANC

The deeply ingrained logic of state capture and cadre deployment, internal strife, and hesitant reforms have proven severe blows to the ANC’s reputation and its electoral appeal. The municipal elections on 1 November 2021 were an important warning signal: For the first time, support for the proud former liberation movement fell below 50 per cent of the vote (45.6 per cent). The ANC gained control of only two of the eight main municipalities. The oppositional Democratic Alliance (DA) now leads unlikely coalitions in the economic powerhouse of Johannesburg, the capital Tshwane (Pretoria), and Gauteng’s Ekurhuleni municipality with the populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), the newly formed ActionSA party,

which won 2.3 per cent of the vote, and further parties. The sense of betrayal and impatience is rising, and the so-called “born-frees” or “hashtag generation” hardly feel emotionally attached to the ruling party. This heralds the “slow decay” of the dominant party system in South Africa (Sumich 2017). Despite continued electoral dominance, the times when the ANC garnered more than two thirds of the votes are long gone (see Figure 2). With the 2024 national elections and the ANC’s 55th electoral conference in December 2022 already looming, President Ramaphosa’s room to manoeuvre is limited by the persistent, strong influence of “traditionalists” in the top ranks of his party who resist both meaningful reforms and decisive action against state capture.

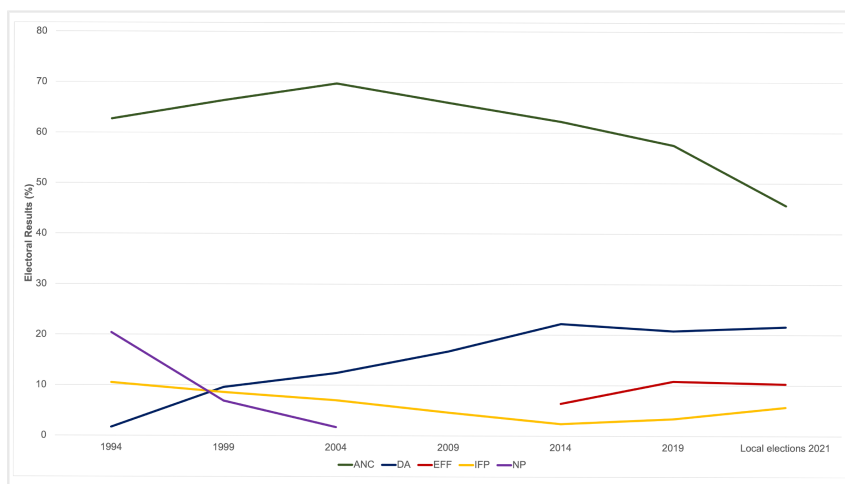


Figure 2. Electoral Results

Source: Electoral Commission of South Africa (2021).

Note: IFP = Inkatha Freedom Party; NP = National Party. In 1997, the NP renamed itself in New National Party (NNP); up until 2003, the Democratic Alliance was called the Democratic Party.

It appears that President Ramaphosa has power which he is not exercising. Public opinion polls consistently show that he is far more popular than his party. Yet continued controversies within the ANC continue to hamper his reform agenda. Discontent in the country will mostly likely persist if not further increase. According to surveys released in 2021, almost 80 per cent of South Africans think the country is heading in the wrong direction.

South Africa’s Challenging Role in the Region

When the ANC came to power after the end of Apartheid in 1994, Nelson Mandela and his successor Thabo Mbeki pursued an ambitious international and regional “African Renaissance” agenda. But other major powers on the continent, such as Nigeria, soon resented the liberal drive of South Africa’s foreign policy. In addition, President Mbeki seemed to overestimate his country’s ability to fulfil a leadership role on the continent. Interestingly, the government was met with enormous goodwill at the international arena in the late 1990s and early 2000s, while South Africa’s direct political and economic influence was largely confined to the Southern African region.

Most fundamentally, South Africa's ability to project power is dependent on domestic dynamics as well as symbolic and material resources. The country is clearly the economic powerhouse in Southern Africa. South Africa's GDP is higher than that of all other 15 members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) combined. For that reason, other strong SADC members Angola and Zimbabwe have closely monitored South Africa, wary of the regional hegemon becoming too powerful. Relatedly, the hegemon has remained indebted to the rest of the continent and to other former liberation movements which supported the ANC when the organisation was banned under Apartheid. Attempting to be a strong partner on the continent, South Africa provides development support to African peers, steered by its Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), and, with varying success, has been very active in crisis management and peacebuilding – for instance, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Lesotho.

Nevertheless, two developments have severely inhibited South Africa's regional role. First, recurrent waves of xenophobic attacks against other African citizens in 2008, 2015, and 2019/2020 have massively tarnished the country's image. Second, due to its – in regional terms – industrialised economy, South Africa is the dominant economic power in the region. For instance, branches of the South African Shoprite chain can be found all over the SADC region. The country is also a magnet for migrants from the whole region – which has recurrently caused public controversy. Yet sluggish growth, high levels of poverty, and political factionalism (particularly within the ANC itself) have diverted attention from regional challenges. Today, the South African government is increasingly turning inwards. Thus, South Africa is a regional hegemon but currently fulfils no particular leadership role in its region. This parallels the experiences of other subregional heavyweights in Africa, such as Nigeria, Egypt, and Ethiopia, as well as Kenya ([Cheeseman 2022](#)).

South Africa's internal woes put the stability of the region at risk. As South Africa is turning inwards, the region's most powerful country has largely been unable to engage in regional crises in a meaningful and constructive way. This is all the more important as Southern Africa, once a bulwark of stability in Africa, increasingly suffers from multiple, often interconnected crises, most notably the ever-increasing instability and authoritarian rule in neighbouring Zimbabwe, the brutal crackdowns on protesters in eSwatini, and the jihadist insurgency in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado region (see Figure 3). These problems add to the continued instability in Lesotho and the devastating food crisis in southern Madagascar.

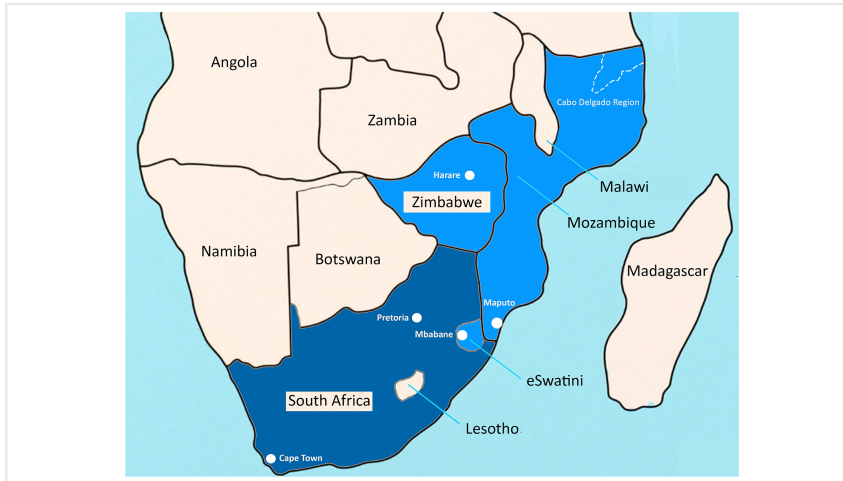


Figure 3. Crises in Southern Africa

Source: Author's own representation based on FreeVectorMaps.com.

Hardening Authoritarian Rule in Zimbabwe

For years, South Africa's northern neighbour Zimbabwe has been marred by increasing instability, economic meltdown, and the authoritarian rule of the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) government. President Emerson Mnangagwa did not fulfil his promises that the Zimbabwean regime would open up after the military forced his predecessor out of office in November 2017. On the country, since the national elections in 2018, his regime has stepped up repression and the intimidation of the opposition, journalists, and civil society actors. At the same time, attempts to re-engage with the West and open up the economy have gone nowhere. The Zimbabwean government's main response to the growing economic and political impasse has been repression. For instance, prominent opposition politician Tendai Biti has been arrested ahead of by-elections that are planned for March 2022.

The situation in Zimbabwe has direct repercussions for South Africa, its largest trading partner. Most goods go through the Beitbridge border post between the two countries. In particular, the influx of Zimbabwean migrants to the larger neighbour has been the subject of repeated public controversy. Estimates vary substantially: while some observers believe that two million Zimbabweans have fled to South Africa, others speak of fewer than 700,000 refugees (Melber and Southall 2021). Approximately 180,000 Zimbabweans hold a special Zimbabwean Exemption Permit that grants them the right to work in South Africa (Mhaka 2022). However, a considerable number of the migrants can hardly make a living, adding to the already high unemployment rate in South Africa.

As the regional leader, South Africa has tried for years to exert a moderating influence on the Zimbabwean government. Yet the response has been controversial: The ANC government's approach, long described as "quiet diplomacy," especially under Thabo Mbeki (1999–2008) and Jacob Zuma (2009–2018), was criticised as tacitly endorsing the actions of the Mugabe government. In 2008 and 2009 South Africa exerted pressure that led to the formation of a so-called Government

of National Unity between the ruling ZANU-PF and the oppositional Movement for Democratic Change – Tsvangirai (MDC-T) after an election mired by violence and apparent fraud. South Africa hardly criticised human rights violations, focusing instead on Western sanctions against their neighbour. The solidarity between former liberation movements has also guided the hesitant regional response by the SADC towards Zimbabwe.

Since President Ramaphosa took office in 2018, the South African government has taken a more critical stance towards Mnangagwa and his coterie in the neighbouring country. Senior government and ANC representatives openly condemned increased state repression and demanded the crisis be resolved (ICG 2020). In this context, Ramaphosa sent an ANC delegation to Harare in September 2020 to facilitate dialogue between the ZANU-PF, opposition members, and civil society actors. However, South Africa's actual influence remains limited – the Mnangagwa government barred the ANC envoys from meeting with the opposition as they had planned.

It seems that South African attempts vis-à-vis Zimbabwe have subsided. In light of South Africa's own domestic problems, President Ramaphosa's publicly visible engagement with the neighbouring country waned in 2021. This is despite the Zimbabwean state repression's negative consequences for South Africa and for the broader region.

Hidden Brutality in eSwatini

The Kingdom of eSwatini (formerly known as Swaziland) is one of the smallest countries in Africa, and it is completely surrounded by South Africa and Mozambique. It has only 1.1 million inhabitants. King Mswati III has ruled the continent's only absolute monarchy since 1986. For years, protestors have appealed for democratic progress from the absolute monarch and accused him and his court household, including his 15 wives, of squandering public resources (Voice of America 2021). In May 2021 police started to brutally crack down on those protesting against the king (Mbuyisa and Mndebele 2021). Security forces killed dozens of civilians who had taken to the streets, banned the People's United Democratic Movement (Pudemo), shut down the internet, and halted the delivery of petitions calling for democratic reforms. An Afrobarometer study shows the citizens' rising discontent with the situation:

Only about one-fourth (27%) of Emaswati believe that their country is 'a full democracy' or 'a democracy with minor problems,' down from 39% in 2018 (Mbuso 2021).

The crisis in the tiny kingdom has largely flown under the radar of public attention abroad. Right from the start of the mayhem, protestors pleaded to the SADC, the African Union, and the United Nations to mediate and to impose sanctions on King Mswati III and his government (Voice of America 2021). The South African government called on the king and protestors to end the violence and resolve the crisis through peaceful means. The ANC, which has close historic ties to eSwatini's government due to its support of the anti-Apartheid struggle, criticised the government openly:

The use of security forces to quell political dissent and the failure to address legitimate civilian concerns complicates the conflict and adds fuel to the fire,

said ANC head of international relations Lindiwe Zulu (quoted in [Voice of America 2021](#)). As the chairperson of the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence, and Security Cooperation, President Ramaphosa sent a special envoy to eSwatini.

It is hard to gauge from the outside how strong the South African pressure on the eSwatini government is and how active current diplomatic efforts are. However, more than half a year after the brutal crackdowns in June, neither eSwatini's large neighbour nor the SADC mediation has been able to contribute to a lasting solution to the crisis.

Islamist Insurgency in Mozambique

In October 2017 the jihadi terror group Ansar al-Sunna launched its first attack in Mozambique's northern Cabo Delgado region. The group, locally known as al-Shabaab (not related to the Somali group) later overran the port town Mocímboa da Praia and attacked another coastal town, Palma. The rise of Islamist terror in Cabo Delgado constitutes a threat beyond the borders of Mozambique for two reasons: First, neighbouring countries such as Tanzania, Rwanda, and South Africa fear that they could also be destabilised by the Islamist terror. The "Islamic State" (IS) has claimed that the terror group is connected to its global network. Second, major natural extraction is planned in Cabo Delgado. In 2019 the French gas and petrol group Total announced its plan to invest 20 billion USD to begin extracting natural gas by 2024 ([Savane 2021](#)). The repeated jihadist attacks and ensuing fights caused at least 3,700 deaths and displaced more than 800,000 people. Only in August 2021 was Mocímboa recaptured.

Mozambique's neighbours and the SADC quickly became involved in the crisis. As, according to credible reports, the government was overwhelmed by the terror attacks, it hired military contractors from Russia (apparently the "Wagner Group") and South Africa's Dyck Advisory Group, to fight the insurgency. Since July 2021 SADC countries have deployed small military contingents to northeastern Mozambique. However, authoritarian Rwanda, not South Africa, has driven the regional response. Rwandan troops reclaimed Mocímboa from al-Shabaab. The Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) initially sent 1,000 soldiers and police officers to Cabo Delgado, eventually increasing its troop numbers to approximately 2,000. Responding to the improved security situation, some schools have re-opened ([Smith 2022](#)). By contrast, South Africa has sent only a small number of soldiers and has kept a low profile in Mozambique (Estelle and Darden 2021).

Economically, Mozambique is highly dependent on South Africa. Additionally, South Africa's Sasol company has strongly invested in its neighbour's gas sector (Estelle and Darden 2021). It is therefore conspicuous that South Africa's government has taken a low profile when it comes to fighting the impasse in Cabo Delgado. First, recently there have been tensions between the two governments. Second, despite pressure exercised by South Africa and Tanzania, Mozambican president Filipe Nyusi initially refused to accept regional military help and instead hired military contractors and invited the RDF to help. The relationship between

South Africa and authoritarian Rwanda, in turn, is at an all-time low. Only later did Nyusi accept an SADC military presence in his country. Third, domestic security considerations might have played a part: “South Africa’s role as a hub for terrorist financing on the continent also complicates its potential involvement” (Estelle and Darden 2021). Fourth, there are rumours that members of the ANC are involved in criminal syndicates and drug-trafficking cartels. If true, this would further complicate South Africa’s role vis-à-vis Mozambique.

Prospects for Support and Cooperation

Due to domestic problems, South Africa as the biggest and most powerful country in the region increasingly fails to act as a regulatory power in Southern Africa. President Ramaphosa’s attention is on the domestic arena and his challengers within the ANC, while his country’s ability to act abroad is severely constrained. The domestic challenges and rifts in South Africa mean that the regional hegemon has limited attention and ability to help solve the region’s multiple crises. The reasons for the government’s insufficient regional engagement differ, but there is a general tendency towards a lack of real engagement in South Africa’s immediate neighbourhood. This is all the more important, as the regional hegemon’s domestic challenges put at risk the stability of the broader Southern Africa region, once perhaps the most stable African subregion.

Both the European Union and Germany have a preeminent interest in supporting and collaborating with South Africa and the broader Southern Africa region. First of all, South Africa is a democratic regional power. Its foreign policy and perspective are not identical to the EU’s and Germany’s – for instance, South Africa controversially abstained from the UN General Assembly resolution that on 2 March 2022 requested the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. (Traditionally, parts of the ruling ANC have maintained close relations with Russia and China; there are even allegations that the party receives donations from Russian sources.) Yet both sides share an interest in a rules-based international order that can facilitate further international cooperation. Germany’s G7 presidency in 2022 with its focus on tackling climate change and overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as strengthening democracies around the globe, provides an opportunity to further deepen collaboration. Relatedly, South Africa’s progressive constitution closely aligns with the new German government’s focus on globally promoting human rights and women’s empowerment.

Second, South Africa’s GDP of more than 300 billion EUR (2020) makes it the continent’s third-largest economy, trailing only Nigeria and Egypt. German business is strongly engaged: More than 600 German companies operate in South Africa, employing over 100,000 people directly and a similar number indirectly. Stepping up reforms and further strengthening the rule of law would help attract more foreign direct investment in the years to come. Creating a business-friendly climate while safeguarding labour rights and environmental standards will be a key component to reviving South Africa’s economy and overcoming the economic depression.

The German–South African Binational Commission (BNC) should be the focal point for further strengthening the relationship on the governmental level. A key

area to enhance cooperation could be energy transition. South Africa urgently needs to step up clean and reliable energy production. Due to its high share of coal in energy production, South Africa's carbon footprint per head is almost as high as that of European emitters. At the most current Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow, South Africa, the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany agreed on the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JUST) that will provide 8.5 billion USD to the country to facilitate South Africa's energy transition away from coal. Building on this major breakthrough, the European Green Deal should further support South Africa's path towards reliable and clean energy production.

South Africa can draw on its progressive constitution, strong judiciary, ingenious civil society, and media to regain its lustre. President Ramaphosa could be bolder in pursuing his reform agenda and overcoming the infighting within the ANC. Although internal dynamics are decisive, increased cooperation and support may help to bring South Africa back on track. Otherwise, the repercussions for the country and the Southern African region will most likely be substantial.

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